

**An Analysis of
John F Kennedy's
Presidential
Inauguration Speech.**

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On January 20 1960 John Fitzgerald Kennedy delivered perhaps his most famous oratory work – his Presidential inauguration address. Much of what is believed about President Kennedy has been obscured by his untimely death but this speech perhaps best captures his legacy, or at least his aims, in a pure form. In order to fully understand the meaning behind the inauguration address the factors around it must first be understood including the context of the time as well as the political beliefs that Kennedy held himself while the audience that the address was directed at, along with future policy intentions, must also be taken into consideration. Before analysing the address itself this essay will first examine the context within which it was made in order to outlay the influences that shaped the address to be what it was. Developments in the Cold War such as Kennedy's pushing of the missile gap theory, the upcoming competition between capitalism and communism in the newly emerging nations of the third world and Kennedy's belief that the prestige of the Presidency needed restoring after Eisenhower's long and relatively cautious tenure in office all contributed to shaping the address into what it ultimately became. This contextualisation of the address essentially allows for it to be considered on the merits of its time.

The main body of the essay, with the context already outlined, will analyse the address itself which, much like his term in office, is a compromise of sorts with it attempting to appeal to any and all people while ensuring at the same time that he appeared strong and ready to guard the United States all along its periphery against the feared expansion of Communism, emanating, as many assumed, directly from Moscow. Now seen as a relatively militaristic address, it first acknowledged the fathers of the American Revolution before then committing to defend that revolution and the freedoms it ensured on a global basis. The address was committed mainly to America's place in the world rather than any domestic issues that the US itself was facing at the time, a sign of Kennedy's aim to restore American prestige, and indeed the prestige of the Presidency itself. However it has entered history as a speech of

massive significance due to the obligations which it brought about. The US, too far gone on the track of globalism to retreat to isolation, could afford, according to Kennedy, to pay any price, in order to ensure the survival of American ideals even if a price had to be paid for lands far from the territory of the United States itself. Applauded by many at the time the speech set a precedent which some argue was not repealed until the 1970s with the advent of the Nixon Doctrine and a US foreign policy based more on realism and shared costs. This truly was an address with massive historical consequences brought about by its context and its influences.

The late fifties was a tumultuous time for the United States as it raced to catch up in the Space Race and in the development of Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles in which the Soviet Union, so it was believed, were so far ahead. One of these believers was John F Kennedy who along with influential journalist Joe Alsop publicly declared the existence of a ‘missile gap’ between Moscow and Washington. “In a speech to the Senate in August 1958, he explicitly compared the 1950s in America to the 1930s in Britain”¹ believing that the US could not allow itself to be caught off guard as the British had been. Kennedy had obviously been influenced by his time abroad in Europe as the continent headed towards World War Two, with his final year thesis, *Why England Slept*, warning America that “pacifism was an insane proposition”². His hawkish attitude in the 1950s during his Senate years was influenced directly by this previous experience and led to continued attacks by him on the Eisenhower administration’s policy of relative restraint in military spending. This relative restraint had led Americans to believe that they were in a period of military decline compared to the Soviet Union, a fear that Kennedy played upon through his election campaign when he

¹ Hugh Brogan, *Kennedy* (New York, 1996), p. 43.

² Hugh Brogan, *Kennedy* (New York, 1996), p. 16.

proclaimed in 1960 that the latest military budget of the Eisenhower administration was “too low by a substantial margin”³. Thus militarization is a strong theme throughout his inauguration address with another reason for it being was because as a young Democratic president he did not want to seem weak for the last Democratic president was badgered as having “lost” China and so Kennedy needed to be seen as strong on defence even over and above his hawkish Senatorial record. Beyond the realm of the military however the ending of the 1950s saw the emergence of newly independent states throughout Africa and Asia among which American prestige and leadership meant little, apparently due to Eisenhower’s failure to comprehend and acknowledge the growth of third world nationalism⁴. Some of these states looked more towards Moscow than to Washington and this proved worrying for the US. Nixon, being seen as complicit in Eisenhower’s lack of initiative towards new nations, was thus at a disadvantage as regards the election campaign of 1960 and in Kennedy’s inauguration address he specifically mentions new states who had broken from colonial control. As such Kennedy was seen as a young candidate of change while Nixon was simply promoting the status quo as it had been for the past eight years under Eisenhower. Overall it seemed that America was a less satisfied society by the time of Kennedy’s inauguration due to the apparent malaise that had inflicted the White House during the latter years of the Eisenhower presidency⁵. However despite this, Nixon came very close to continuing the Republican hold on the White House as Kennedy won the election by a paltry 120,000 votes which meant he had relatively little leeway to change domestic policy. This meant Kennedy would have to make his mark on foreign issues instead and his inauguration address certainly reflects this as it concentrates almost solely on America’s place in the global system.

³ Christopher A. Preble, ‘Who Ever Believed in the ‘Missile Gap’?’: John F. Kennedy and the Politics of National Security’, *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 4 (2003), pp. 801 – 826: 811.

⁴ James N. Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (Lawrence, 1991), p.17.

⁵ James N. Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (Lawrence, 1991), p.21.

Kennedy's inaugural address did indeed concern itself almost exclusively with America's place in the world⁶. It could be argued that this is actually what has made the speech as famous as it has become for it is worldwide in scope, placing America at the very centre of the world stage willing to negotiate with the Soviet Union, recognizing the rising tide of newly independent nations and at the same time inciting the Monroe Doctrine in its warning to the world that the Americas, both North and South, would remain "the master of its own house"⁷. Kennedy was seen as the active candidate of change and his address was seen by many as the beginning of a new chapter in American history. The American Dream, while intact, was not expanding during Eisenhower's latter years in the White House but John F Kennedy, as the leader of the New Frontiersmen, as William Appleman Williams wrote⁸, came to power with the promise of rebuilding American military might and American prestige with a call to first defend the "revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought"⁹. Kennedy had stated that "our frontiers today are on every continent"¹⁰ and his inaugural address certainly reflected this. Throughout the address, co-written by Theodore Sorenson, history was intertwined with the present as if to signal a sense of renewal more than radical change.

At the beginning of the address Kennedy stated that the "celebration of freedom" that was his victory indeed signified "renewal as well as change" citing the oath he swore as being the same that "our forebears prescribed nearly a century and three-quarters ago"¹¹. This was the first link made between the founding of the republic and the election of Kennedy signifying

⁶ Hugh Brogan, *Kennedy* (New York, 1996), p.53.

⁷ John F. Kennedy, 'Inauguration Speech'. Washington DC. January 20, 1961.

⁸ William A. Williams, *Empire as a way of life* (New York, 2007), p. 185.

⁹ John F. Kennedy, 'Inauguration Speech'. Washington DC. January 20, 1961.

¹⁰ William A. Williams, *Empire as a way of life* (New York, 2007), p. 186.

¹¹ John F. Kennedy , 'Inauguration Speech'. Washington DC. January 20, 1961.

the renewal of that republic. This link was drawn upon again when he reminded his audience that the world was now a very different place from the revolutionary days but that its ideals were still at issue in the world. Those revolutionaries had the task of preserving and expanding the republic and its ideals. By drawing this link Kennedy reminded the US that “we are the heirs of that first revolution”¹². As such the US was no longer permitted to be cautious, judging its actions individually, but it was to take the initiative in the world and go forward to ensure the spread of the revolutionary ideal of liberty. This was confirmed by the mention of the “human rights to which this nation has always been committed...at home and around the world”¹³ and to which Kennedy committed the US to protect. It is here that the address begins to develop a constant theme of globalism with America as the central and righteous power. It is also here that its “sense of mission”¹⁴ begins to unfold as Kennedy went on to announce one of the most famous sections of the speech - “Let every nation know...that we shall pay any price...to assure the survival and the success of liberty”¹⁵. While it is obvious that this was meant to be heard in Moscow in order to deter perceived Communist aggression, it was also a very clear call that the US was ready to defend its interests around the world and was something of a climax for Kennedy’s earlier rhetoric citing the American Revolution because it also meant that the spreading of US ideals would be protected on worldwide frontiers by the Kennedy administration. In order to fully understand this however Kennedy’s past must also be remembered for in the 1930s he was in Europe as Hitler took power and reflected on the advantages and disadvantages of dictatorships and democracies. Kennedy saw democracy’s “short term incompetence (as having brought) the West to the

¹² John F. Kennedy , ‘Inauguration Speech’. Washington DC. January 20, 1961.

¹³ John F. Kennedy , ‘Inauguration Speech’. Washington DC. January 20, 1961.

¹⁴ James N. Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (Lawrence, 1991), p.27.

¹⁵ John F. Kennedy , ‘Inauguration Speech’. Washington DC. January 20, 1961.

brink of destruction” consistently maintaining that “a democracy seldom wakes before it is too late”¹⁶. This should be borne in mind when the militaristic values of the inauguration speech are being discussed for it seems that Kennedy was a fervent believer in the weaknesses of democracy and how they needed to be minimized in order for one to effectively challenge a totalitarian state. His constant belief in the existence of a missile gap may have been a product of this but there is no doubt that he knew all too well the political advantages of constantly speaking of defence weaknesses brought about by the GOP.

The next section of his address reached out to America’s traditional allies before continuing on to acknowledge the “new states whom we welcome to the ranks of the free”¹⁷. This was significant in that Eisenhower had generally failed to comprehend the phenomenon of third world nationalism but now Kennedy was reaching out to the new states and pledging that one form of colonial control would not be allowed to be replaced by a “far more iron tyranny”¹⁸. The new and emerging battleground of the Cold War was to be these newly independent states and many were not automatically pro-American in their political and economic views. With this in mind Kennedy offered “our best efforts to help them help themselves”¹⁹. Not only was Kennedy after committing the US to defending US interests and US allies around the world but he was now also committing to the less militaristic but perhaps just as hegemonic aim of bringing assistance to nations that the US deemed it necessary to assist. It is in here that the seeds of the Vietnam War’s ‘credibility gap’ lie for with these commitments of unlimited assistance and defence Kennedy had signed what amounted to a blank cheque, even if a state was not of crucial importance to the US system of containment.

¹⁶ Hugh Brogan, *Kennedy* (New York, 1996), p.18.

¹⁷ John F. Kennedy, ‘Inauguration Speech’. Washington DC. January 20, 1961.

¹⁸ John F. Kennedy, ‘Inauguration Speech’. Washington DC. January 20, 1961.

¹⁹ John F. Kennedy, ‘Inauguration Speech’. Washington DC. January 20, 1961.

This was what “fits (Kennedy) into the mainstream of American over-confidence”²⁰. The expansive policy of globalism would boost American prestige, and the prestige of the President which Kennedy saw as being very important in the eyes of the world, but it was to prove costly. It was however, what differentiated Kennedy from his predecessor as Kennedy had castigated Ike for placing “fiscal security ahead of national security”²¹.

Kennedy finishes this early defensive tone to the speech by announcing the Alliance for Progress programme in South and Central America. This was one of Kennedy’s responses to the “revolutionary spirit and import substitution”²² that Fidel Castro best encapsulated. Without development and economic progress the South and Central American nations would be more vulnerable to leaders of a socialist (meaning Soviet-led to Washington) orientation taking power but he warned against any such thoughts in declaring that “this Hemisphere intends to remain the master of its own house”²³. In 1959 Castro had moved towards the Soviet orbit but Kennedy used his address as a warning against any more moves outside of the American system by first holding out the olive branch of the Alliance for Progress and then his arrows by reminding the world of the Monroe Doctrine. As the Bay of Pigs Incident would later show, Kennedy’s address “generated the confidence that sustained...interventionist momentum”²⁴.

²⁰ C.J. Bartlett, *The rise and fall of the Pax Americana: United States foreign policy in the twentieth century* (London, 1974), p.146.

²¹ Christopher A. Preble, ‘Who Ever Believed in the ‘Missile Gap’?’: John F. Kennedy and the Politics of National Security’, *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 4 (2003), pp. 801 – 826: 806.

²² David Ryan, *US foreign policy in world history* (London, 2003), p.159.

²³ John F. Kennedy, ‘Inauguration Speech’. Washington DC. January 20, 1961.

²⁴ William A. Williams, *The tragedy of American diplomacy* (New York, 1972), p.300.

Kennedy's theme of using "the arrows and the olive branch simultaneously"²⁵ continued in his address as he offered a request to "those nations who would make themselves our adversary...to begin anew the quest for peace"²⁶. Eisenhower, while having accelerated the arms race at a pace much slower than he could have, had never managed to bring about an arms control treaty between the US and the USSR. Kennedy however had consistently advocated a higher defence budget but yet he also wished to see an arms control treaty be signed with Moscow, something that was done in 1963 when atmospheric nuclear tests were banned²⁷. While the Cuban Missile Crisis was undoubtedly an influence on this it is still reflective of Kennedy's 'olive and arrows' approach. This is especially so when he stated in his address that "we dare not tempt them with weakness. For only when our arms are sufficient beyond doubt can we be certain that they will never be employed" while later stating that "let both sides...formulate serious...proposals for the...control of arms"²⁸. Kennedy was calling for a renewing of US-Soviet relations but only if the US could negotiate from a position of strength. He continued on to complain of "both sides being overburdened by the cost of modern weapons" but yet he authorized three special defence funding requests in 1961 alone as if to further show his aim of placing the US in a position of even higher advantage²⁹. Context is very important in this regard as Kennedy, being a Democrat, did not want to be seen as weak on defence issues while he stood to lose votes in future elections if he were not to appeal to defence workers displaced by Eisenhower's New Look cuts³⁰. These

²⁵ James N. Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (Lawrence, 1991), p.27.

²⁶ John F. Kennedy, 'Inauguration Speech'. Washington DC. January 20, 1961.

²⁷ Michael J. Hunt, *The American Ascendancy: How the United States gained and wielded global dominance* (Chapel Hill, 2007), p. 139.

²⁸ John F. Kennedy, 'Inauguration Speech'. Washington DC. January 20, 1961.

²⁹ William A. Williams, *Empire as a way of life* (New York, 2007), p. 186.

³⁰ Christopher A. Preble, 'Who Ever Believed in the 'Missile Gap'?': John F. Kennedy and the Politics of National Security', *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 4 (2003), pp. 801 – 826: 815.

factors, along with his personal beliefs of democracies tending to be unprepared against totalitarian states would certainly have influenced this contradictory stance within the address. It is this contradiction that has made sure that many today see the address as being quite a militaristic one.

He smoothes out this section of the address however by offering the olive branch in full, challenging both his administration and that of Nikita Khrushchev to join together in creating a “new world of law, where the strong are just and the weak secure”³¹. It could have been that this was to placate the liberal base of the Democratic Party who yearned for a less militaristic US but it may also have been to reach out to the general citizenry who he knew were concerned by US-Soviet relations³². This was a departure from his earlier rhetoric which boldly outlined the connection between the American Revolution and Kennedy’s beginning in office as a sign of major change. The speech has been seen as a compromise by some commentators with Hugh Brogan writing that even at this early stage of the presidency compromises were already being imposed on him as he walked the tightrope of political acceptance, a tightrope made very narrow by the low margin of victory. This is perhaps a reason for the ending of his speech again referencing revolutionary imagery and a grand overall narrative of containment.

Kennedy announced that the “trumpet summons us again...to bear the burden of a long twilight struggle...against...tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself”³³. The new President was to be all things to all people, this statement being another reflection of the globalism that encompassed the whole of the relatively short inauguration address. He continues on to place America at the very heart of the struggle between freedom and tyranny by placing himself in

³¹ John F. Kennedy, ‘Inauguration Speech’. Washington DC. January 20, 1961.

³² James N. Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (Lawrence, 1991), p.28.

³³ John F. Kennedy, ‘Inauguration Speech’. Washington DC. January 20, 1961.

the role of George Washington when he announced that he welcomed the responsibility of “defending freedom in its maximum hour of danger”³⁴. American frontiers were now worldwide and no longer was America an isolationist power – the US was to be the central power, with him stating that it’s “glow...can truly light the world”³⁵. This emphasized the meaning of parts of his address in marking the US was exceptional among nations and that it had risen from a Revolution to now lead the world to a better future. No longer would Americans feel detached from their place within the nation or their place within the world as Kennedy called on his fellow citizens to “ask what (they) can do for your country” while continuing then to expand this and ask his “fellow citizens of the world...what together we can do for the freedom of man”³⁶. Material wealth was no longer the end game as that had already been met with the steady economic growth of the 1950s. What America needed was a renewed sense of purpose and Kennedy’s address was written to set the US on this path as the leader of all free nations stating at the end that “ask of us here, the same high standards of strength and sacrifice that we ask of you”³⁷. This was to be the US as the judge of all people, as the hegemonic power by whom every other nation would be compared. In this sense then the address again related the American Revolution and the “forebears” that Kennedy mentioned early in the speech. The US the exceptional beacon on the hill and Kennedy’s speech was to reflect this, casting away eight years of economic and foreign policy prudence in order to yet again allow the American frontiers expand.

³⁴ John F. Kennedy, ‘Inauguration Speech’. Washington DC. January 20, 1961.

³⁵ John F. Kennedy, ‘Inauguration Speech’. Washington DC. January 20, 1961.

³⁶ John F. Kennedy, ‘Inauguration Speech’. Washington DC. January 20, 1961.

³⁷ John F. Kennedy, ‘Inauguration Speech’. Washington DC. January 20, 1961.

Overall the speech was “uplifting and optimistic in tone, reflect(ing)...a sense of mission”³⁸ while at the time it was acclaimed by both liberals and conservatives due to the content which managed to please both sides of the political divide³⁹. Today seen as quite a militaristic speech it was praised by the *New Republic* for its conciliatory tone but also by the *National Review* for its strong defence of containment and its lack of referencing to ‘welfarism’⁴⁰. Not only are these conflicting reports important, in that they show that the speech did in fact appeal to both sides of the fence, but the *National Review* report shows up that Kennedy did not deal with domestic policies in his speech. He did this in order to avoid the debris and divisiveness of the Democratic Party platform⁴¹. Divisiveness could bring about the loss of congressional support and Kennedy already had a very small mandate for change. It was because of this that any change had to come through foreign policy and this speech was aimed squarely at renewing America’s place in the world. Kennedy’s fear of the weaknesses inherent in democracy are clear in the speech as he advocates caution and negotiations only from a position of strength but it is the references to the American Revolution that possibly made the speech as successful as it ultimately became as these references restored Americans faith in their place in the world as the torchbearers of liberty. While these references, and the overall confident globalism of the speech, made it great rhetoric, it is also these things that have made the speech as historically significant as it is. William Appleman Williams considers Kennedy to be one of the cleverest imperial presidents while other commentators have asked whether this speech was the one that perhaps brought America into the mire of Vietnam and the support of allies for superficial rather than strategic reasons. This historiographical debate still rages but it cannot be

³⁸ James N. Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (Lawrence, 1991), p.27.

³⁹ James N. Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (Lawrence, 1991), p.28.

⁴⁰ James N. Giglio, *The Presidency of John F. Kennedy* (Lawrence, 1991), p.28.

⁴¹ Hugh Brogan, *Kennedy* (New York, 1996), p.53.

forgotten that Kennedy did promise that his nation would “pay any price and support any friend”. No limits were put on the policy and with this American credibility was suddenly vulnerable on a worldwide basis, a basis that America could ill afford in years to come.

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